"Our choice, our freedom, our right": Muslim Women's political mobilization on the issue of veiling.

“What have MCB [Muslim council of Britain] done for us? Nothing-they’re all men!” (Woman of Muslim background, London)

Campaign picture by the Southall Black Sisters, retrieved at http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/pgallery1.html, April 6, 2009

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2 This paper is strongly based on a joint draft paper and common research work in the VEIL project (www.veil-project.eu) of the presenter together with Linda Woodhead (University of Lancaster). For the Lisbon ECPR Joint Session the paper was further developed by the presenter, but is still work in progress!

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Introduction: Political contestation of Muslim immigration

“In the lead-up to the General Election of 1998, while I was in my final year at school, I witnessed the tone in the immigration debate becoming progressively harsher. Immigrants learnt that they didn’t have the same basic values as Danes, and those of us from ethnic minorities didn’t feel included in the community. Up until then the only difference between me and Danes was that I am a Muslim, but now being an immigrant became a very complex issue [...] I found the debate provocative, and it was the direct cause of my involvement in politics.” (Asma Abdol Hamid)

The above stated quotation steams from the Danish Asma Abdol Hamid, a young second generation Muslim, wearing the hijab, who had been after lots of public controversy elected in 2005 to the City Council of the Danish city Odense.

The statement by Asma illustrates also beyond Denmark, recent developments in European immigration states: Starting with the 1990ies, Islam and Muslims have become in some countries a significant point of political contestation. In Austria the then leader of the far right party FPÖ, stated already in the beginning of the 90-ies, that “the social order of Islam is opposed to our Western values” (quoted after Mudde 2007, 84). Most notably gender relations are at the very centre of those conflicts. Bodily performances of women serve as signifiers of national belonging and function as boundaries between “us” and “them” (Hadj-Abdou/Rosenberger 2009 a and b, Philips/Saharso 2008).

In particular in the current decade, those politicized debates over Muslims immigrants intensified, and have been led to policy response all over Europe:

Those debates have been used to call for further tightening immigration policies and integration measures (Verloo/Roggeband 2007, Fekete 2006; Yilmaz 2007, Joppke 2007; Kofman 2005).

But at the same time, those processes of politicization also triggered the political mobilization by Muslims themselves and the formation of an Islamic identity in Europe. Brown (2006, 419), mentions three key points that mark the change towards an Islamic identity: the Salman

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3 Asma Abdol Hamid, was elected as a deputy MP for the left wing party The Danish Red-Green Alliance in 2005. The passage continues as follows: “My political activities began in upper secondary school when I joined DSU (Danmarks Socialdemokratiske Ungdom/Social Democratic Youth of Denmark, ed.). I wanted to take part and put my mark on Danish society, and to combat discrimination. [...] My choice of education did not come out of the blue. At home I was used to people coming and asking my father for advice. [...] he is a respected figure for his role in the resolution of conflicts within Vollsmose’s Arab community.

Straight after taking my final higher commercial exam in 2000, I started a club for girls, PAF (Pigernes Aktivitetsforening/Activity Club for Girls, ed.). I thought there was a need for activities aimed at the girls [...] In addition, I found it unacceptable that, in Vollsmose at the time, immigrant boys who were troublemakers were getting all the attention. A lot of money was spent on them. There was total disregard for the fact that many immigrant girls also had problems, but reacted in a different way – maybe by staying at home and isolating themselves.” http://www.kvinfo.dk/side/674/article/61/, retrieved April, 3, 2009
Rushdie affair, and the abandonment of the myth of return, as well as the politicisation of the hijab.

In particular those controversies have not only led to an increasing visibility of but also increasing political activity of women of Muslim background. They publicly raised their voice on issues of their concern, took part in movement based political participation such as demonstrations, engaged in diverse civic and political initiatives (Silvestri 2008, 17), and founded local, national, and transnational associations (e.g. European Forum of Muslim women 2006), a.o. developing counter discourses contesting dominant perspectives on Muslim women. Along gendered perceptions of “Muslim integration” also governments have increasingly “discovered” them, as “agents of political change” and have put efforts to involve them into political institutions. (e. g. Muslim women’s network 2006)

“Silence” of scientific research: A pattern of reproducing Muslim women as victims?

However those phenomena are hardly addressed in scientific research and little is known about the political engagement of migrant women in general (cf. Martiniello 2005) and of Muslim women in Europe in particular (Maussen 2007). As research on political participation of migrants is steadily growing, important insights about immigrant organizations (e.g. Schrover/Vermeulen 2005), political representation (e.g. Garbaye 2002), the relation of social and political participation of immigrants (e.g. Tillie/Jacobs 2004), or among others, issues of their voting behaviour (e.g. Martiniello 2000) have been gained so far. Nevertheless, these studies do usually not consider the gendered dimensions of those processes. The same appears to be true for research with a particular interest in political actions and organization of Muslim communities in Europe (e.g. Allievi 2003, Klaussen 2003, Silvestri 2007; Statham 2004). Those strands of research which are actually dealing with Muslim female migrants are often limited to religious and cultural identities and modes of belonging of Muslim women (e.g. Fadil 2005, Nökel 2002, for an exception see Coene/Longman 2008).

This more or less “scientific silence” on Muslim women’s agency in political conflicts in Europe seems to reproduce or at least to reflect to some extent societal discourses and essentialized perceptions of (passive or even victimized) (Muslim) women.

To address this so far under-researched issue, the paper at hand is aiming to shed more light on the issue of political mobilization of women of Muslim background.

By taking a comparative perspective – contrasting the UK to Austria- the paper wants to contribute to literature on political participation, explaining which effects political opportunity
structures have on mobilization, which dynamics they cause, and how they shape political action of Muslim women.

The central research interest of the paper thus lies in contributing to the understanding of strategies that Muslim women develop and which “tactics of claiming space” (Strasser 2003) they enhance.

The interest therefore is not on intra-Muslim debates and identity formation of Muslim women (e.g. Predelli 2008, Amir Moazami/Jouili 2006), nor on the meaning of covering for covered women themselves (e.g. Höglinger 2003, Karakasoglu/ Boos-Nünning 2005, Silvestri 2008), but on if and how female Muslim actors enter into the increasingly heated public debates about veiling in Europe.

It has to be underlined that Muslim women are not to be understood as a monolithic entity, but are characterized by a variety of political attitudes, degree of religiosity, socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. In consequence, under the term “Muslim women” those women of Muslim background, who are actively advocating in favour of Muslim practices such as the headscarf, but also against, are comprised.

- To analyse political activity of Muslim women is not only important in order to gain a more nuanced picture of Muslim women, but is also of high relevance for theory on democracy. As has been pointed out by political science, political engagement of citizens is a precondition for democratic governance (van Deth 2006, quoted after Rosenberger/Walter 2009, 14). -

As the paper is led by a non essentialist approach of Muslim women, it assumes at the same time, that it is less “ethnic” or “cultural” factors which shape and influence political action of Muslim women but rather political opportunities in a given context that enable or constrain this political action.

**Political opportunity approach & its blind spots in respect to categories of immigration and gender**

The political opportunity approach has been developed in the framework of social movement theory, but has been recently also increasingly used to explain political integration of immigrants (e.g. Koopmans et al 2005). It aims to analyse variance in the periodicity, style and content of activist claims over time and variance across institutional contexts (Meyer/Minkoff 2004, 1458). Political opportunities can be defined as “all those aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize
effectively” (McAdam et al 2001). McAdam (1996) and Tarrow (1994) have described formal institutional settings including legislation, and informal power relations (actor constellations) under political opportunities, and have thus focused on generic opportunities. Others, such as Meyer/Minkoff (2004) have underlined the necessity to consider also context specific (or issue specific) opportunities. In contrast to Tarrow and McAdam, Kriesi emphasizes rather long lasting opportunities and gives less attention to actor alliances in his concept. He defines: 1) national cleavage structures, 2) formal institutional structures 3) informal procedures and prevailing strategies and 4) alliance structures as central elements of the political opportunity structure (Kriesi et al 1995).

Bengtsson (2008) has indicated that the Political Opportunity approach is biased in several ways when studying political activity of immigrants. It emphasizes the political in a narrow sense. But in particular migrants tend to be exercise activities which go beyond the understanding of the political in a narrow sense. And most notably it also tends to ignore deeper social structures like how class, gender and ethnicity are constructed in a certain society (ibid, 12).

Bengtsson nevertheless pledges not to give up the approach, but instead to apply a more sensitive and nuanced perspective, when studying political integration of immigrants.

Being aware of and sensitive to those biases of the opportunity approach, the paper will make use of the concept developed by Kriesi et al (1995) and further used and extended by Koopmans et al (2005), to cross-nationally explain political mobilization of Muslim women on the issue of veiling.

**Considering frames as central part of political mobilization**

Social movement theorists have pointed out, that political opportunities are not fixed or static, but they are changeable. Moreover it is important to underline, that the extent to which political opportunities constrain or facilitate action is partly contingent on how they are framed (Snow/Benford 2000, 631). Under framing the production of mobilizing and counter mobilizing ideas is to be understood, or to use a term from Stuart Hall “the politics of signification” (quoted after Snow/Benford 2000, 613).

Frame analysis conceptualizes policy processes as fields of contestation where actors with different interests and degrees of power compete over different interpretations/definitions of a problem and the respective solutions (Verloo/Roggeband 2007). Those different interpretations or “frames” give meaning to “reality” (Snow/Benford 2000). Frames are thus
“symbolic-interpretative constructs, or ‘schemata’ (consisting of shared beliefs, images and symbols) to make sense of complex issues, and shaping them at the same time by inscribing meaning to it” (Saharso/Lettinga 2008).

So frames can be understood as dynamic in the sense that they are shaped by political opportunities, but they also have at the same time some impact on the opportunities themselves. The paper will thus put a certain emphasis on how Muslim female actors in Austria and the United Kingdom themselves frame the issue of the Muslim headscarf.

**Forms and arenas of political mobilization**

It has to be noted, that forms of political action and mobilization of Muslim women take place in different (political) arenas. First, women take increasingly representative functions in political bodies. The UK already had its first Muslim women mayor in 1994 (Cesari w.y.). In Austria due to a lack of citizenship status, women of Muslim background did not hold for long any political posts. In the last years however most notably there are female representatives of Muslim background at the local level, and since 2008 there is also the first national deputy of Muslim background represented in parliament.

Another form is participation via electoral processes. There are no numbers on Muslim vote in general, and even less is known about Muslim female vote. As Cesari points out, there is no Muslim vote as such, but certain preferences for political parties at the left spectrum can be noticed (Cesari w.y.).

Another arena/form of political mobilization where Muslim women are active, are informal ways of doing politics, or what Cesari has called “civil citizenship” (ibid.) To study patterns of civil citizenship one has to look at (predominantly local) levels such as Islamic centres.

Finally lobbying and pressure groups have to be taken into account to analyse political mobilization. The paper puts a.o. a focus on the two latter forms of political mobilization, as Kastoryano (2007), has pointed to the fact, that it is rather the sub-national levels and (local) associations, which play a crucial role in negotiating claims of immigrant communities. However it has to be considered that the existence of political representatives of Muslim background also has an effect on mobilization of Muslim women, in more informal arenas, due to possible actor alliances.
Muslim demography and status in the UK and Austria

It is estimated that there are currently around two million Muslims living in the UK – around 3% of the population. Forty-eight per cent of British Muslims are women. Islam is the second largest religion in the UK. The vast majority of British Muslims – between 80 and 90% – have formal citizenship status (König 2005, 232). Many immigrants had citizenship rights because of their colonial association with Britain. Children born of a parent settled in Britain attain citizenship status automatically. Naturalisation can also be applied for after living in Britain for five years or, in the case of a spouse of a British citizen, three years. Recent generations are more likely to enter further and higher education, especially in vocational subjects. Muslims lag behind other minority groups in terms of educational attainment and employment. Sixty-six per cent of Muslim women are economically inactive, compared with 26% of women in the UK as a whole, and almost a third (31%) of Muslims of working age in Great Britain had no qualifications – the highest proportion for any religious group. According to research by the Equal Opportunities Commission, young Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black-Caribbean women are almost three to four times more likely than white women to take a job at a lower level than the one they are qualified for (Botcherby, 2006). Nevertheless, growing numbers of young Muslims, including women, are entering higher education and professions.

In Austria, according to the last census from 2001, 4.2% of the resident population is Muslim, and 44% of them are women (Statistik Austria 2006, 55). Islam is the second largest religion here as well. Immigrants of Muslim faith mainly settled in the framework of post-war labour migration or, as in the case of Bosnians, as war refugees. Their stay was conceptualized only temporarily; integration was not intended by the state. Up to today, 72% of Muslims living in Austria do not possess Austrian citizenship (Schakfeh 2005, 155). Third-country nationals are excluded from any political participation rights. Socio-economic participation is inhibited for persons with immigration background relative to the Austrian majority society (Fassmann/Reeger 2007: 196 ff). Women with headscarves are hardly visible in public functions. Especially at the labor market, they face severe problems of discrimination. They have difficulties to find a job (Heine 2005, 105) or they get fired due to the fact of being veiled (Potz/Schinkele 2006, 632). If they are employed they often hold rather non prestigious and/or invisible functions.

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4 The UK census of 2001 included a question on religious affiliation for the first time, and 1,591,000 recorded as ‘Muslim’, which is 2.7% of the population (72% recorded as Christian).
(Abid 2000). This also holds true for second generation of immigrants with Muslim background (Heckl 2007, 33).

To sum up: Both countries have significant Muslim minorities. In the UK as well as in Austria they are confronted with barriers in the educational sector and discrimination at the labor market. The structure of gender, class and ethnicity though shape the status of women of Muslim background to a high extent, even if it can be noted, that there is a certain increase in social mobility, especially in the UK. The most striking difference between the two countries is however the gap of citizenship status among the Muslim population between the two nation states.

**Headscarf policies**

In the UK there is no national regulation or legislation dealing with Muslim covering, and the presumption is therefore that women are free to cover in all spheres of private and public life. It is jilbab and niqab which have become a greater focus of controversy and of public and legal debate than hijab in the UK, particularly since about 2001. In particular the Comments made by Jack Straw and the Shabina Begum case, were the two controversies particularly salient in that realm (see Kilic et al 2009)

There has, however, been no move to regulate face covering in Britain. Recent guidelines for schools and courts about the wearing of niqab by teachers and legal professionals in the court room have indicated that toleration should be the rule (on the grounds of multicultural inclusion), except where the discharge of duty is inhibited, or security is infringed.  

Similar to Britain, Austria has one of the most liberal regulations concerning the expression of religious beliefs and practices in the public realm in Europe. Muslim girls and women are in practice entitled to wear the headscarf in educational institutions and public offices as well as on photos for public documents if the face is clearly identifiable. The headscarf is by the majority of the political representatives framed as a religious practice and thus presented as a no-problem issue. However, in particular the media and the far right party FPÖ (Freiheitliche

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Partei Österreichs/Freedom Party) took the leading role in the headscarf disputes by bringing up the topic, despite a limited scope of actual conflict cases.

The political mobilization of Muslim women in headscarf debates in the UK and in Austria

UK
In the UK a single (transnational) organisation emerged dedicated to the issue of covering: the Assembly for the Protection of Hijab. It was founded in 2003 as a response to the French moves to ban covering, it was organised by Muslim women, and its long-term effectiveness has been undermined by lack of resources and support.

„Protect Hijab“ was founded by an Arab British Muslim woman, Abeer Pharaon. The initiative evolved bottom up: Abeer Pharaon emailed contacts throughout the world saying that the „French sisters“ deserved support, and received a huge response. On 17th January 2004 35 countries around the world saw protests of various sizes, usually outside French embassies. In London around 5,000 picketed the French embassy, whilst an estimated 30,000 marched in France. Pharaon and her supporters lobbied British politicians. They gained the support of the London Mayor, Ken Livingston, and organised a press conference on the day of the French vote, gaining extensive media coverage (much of it favourable – the French example should not be imitated in Britain). The support of some British MPs and other organisations was also secured.

A large conference was held in July 2004. The next step was to lobby members of the European Parliament. All 732 members were contacted, and 70 signed a declaration „on religious rights and freedoms in France and throughout the EU“ which called on member states:

1. To allow outward expression of faith in educational and other state establishments
2. To urge France to rethink its ban
3. To hold a debate in the European Parliament
4. To forward the declaration to the Commission, Council and member governments.

The largest number of signatures was from British MEPs. Since 300 signatures are required, this declaration could not be presented to Parliament.

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7 Information in this paragraph derived from an interview by Linda Woodhead of Abeer Pharaon October 10, 2008
8 Caroline Lucas MEP, Fiona McTaggart MP, George Galloway MP, Muslim Association of Britain, National Assembly against Racism, Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe, and human rights group Liberty, all gave support.
9 European Parliament, Written Declaration on religious rights and freedoms in France and throughout the European Union. 21.2.2005
Despite this significant activity between 2003 and 2005 and despite a good deal of political support from inside and outside the Muslim community in Britain, Protect Hijab was unable to attract significant resources. All its work was carried out by volunteers, mostly women working from home. Attempts to secure an office or funding from Muslim organisations or the government failed, and there was no fixed organisation in place to continue the movement. Although Protect Hijab still exists and has a website, it is no longer active. Abeer Pharaon told in the interview that she regretted the absence of any dedicated campaigning group for Muslim women. She had hoped that the Muslim Women’s Society, in which she was involved, would become representative, but it had not (being mainly for the Arab community). Some other campaigners Linda Woodhead, spoke to also suggested that the existence of Protect Hijab may have actually inhibited the larger, male-dominated, Muslim organisations for taking women’s issues as seriously, since they saw Protect Hijab as carrying out that work successfully. There are no other single issue organisations dedicated solely to this issue, and no significant national bottom-up Muslim women’s organisations. Muslim women’s organisations are usually metropolitan or local rather than national, and are often a branch of a wider organisation.

Overall perhaps the most important ways in which Muslim actors have been active in relation to the debates on covering is not by way of organised political action, but by their being represented – as individuals – in the media debates. The vast majority of these actors are Muslim women. This gives Muslim women a higher public profile than in Austria. They fall into two categories. First, those “symbolic” individuals who are selected by the media to represent the covering issue – often because they have chosen to veil, and second, Muslim actors who themselves speak out on the issue and obtain coverage. To give an example of the first category, when Jack Straw’s comments were made public, BBC Radio 4 carried a half-hour documentary on 12th October which included a brief interview with a niqab-wearing citizen of Mr Straw’s Blackburn constituency, who made the much-cited remark that Jack Straw’s comment was unhelpful because: “…people who don’t have an opinion will form one and no doubt it will be a biased opinion.”

For obvious reasons, it is really only educated, middle class, highly articulate women who make up the second category of Muslim actors. Their claims are varied, but generally amount to a plea for greater understanding and tolerance of covering. The number of such voices heard in the mass media has increased as the controversy on covering has increased, first in relation to the French ban, then the Begum

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case, then the Straw controversy. Public interventions by Muslim actors in general have finally been rather reactive than active.

When analysing framing strategies used in political mobilization by Muslim women in the UK, it can be noted that freedom and rights are the most frequent arguments used. The Pro Hijab slogan is: “Our Choice, Our Freedom, Our Right”. It is not only Protect Hijab which frames its defence of covering in terms of individual rights and freedom of choice, but also the Muslim organisations who have spoken out on the issue. For example, in response to Jack Straw’s comments the Muslim Association of Britain issued a statement saying, “There may be a difference of opinion on niqab, but we have to respect a woman’s right to choose to adopt it”. Similarly, the joint statement issued by a number of Muslim groups, including the Muslim Council of Britain and the Islamic Human Rights Commission, “urged people to be supportive for a woman’s right to wear the veil as this complies with the values upon which western civilisation was founded – the protection of human and religious rights”.

This stress on freedom is also evident in the most publicised public statement by a niqab-wearing woman in Britain. On 25th December 2006 Channel 4 broadcast an “alternative Christmas message” (alternative to the traditional Queen’s Speech, which was broadcast at the same time on BBC). The alternative broadcast was by a Muslim convert wearing niqab and named only “Khadija”. She began by saying that Britain was the best country in which to live for people who wish to practise their religion freely, and went on to mention that her great-grandmother was a suffragette – thus making an implicit link to an earlier struggle for women’s rights. “We are seen as oppressed”, she says, but „since I’ve started covering I feel much more liberated, which I know a lot of people probably won’t be able to understand’.

Thus the argument that women have a right to cover because it is their free choice to do so links closely to the argument that covering is itself liberating. As Zena Robinson puts it, „Why would I chose to do something which would make me feel any lesser of a person? Maybe those women who have been forced to wear the veil, but I made a choice of my own’.

This whole stress clearly counters accusations that women are forced to cover against their will, and that it is a form of patriarchal oppression. Freedom is sometimes extended beyond that of the individual, as when one woman says, „The niqab is not about oppression, it means freedom, of faith, of self, of state”.

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11 MAB, 6/10/06
12 Joint Statement about the veil from Muslim groups, scholars and leaders 17/10/06.
13 Arts London News, ‘Veiled Issues’, 10/10/06
http://www.artslondonnews.co.uk/index.php?opt=article&siid=1464
Austria

Regarding interventions of Muslims in headscarf debates, we can record for Austria that according to a quantitative media analysis conducted for the VEIL project, 27.5% of actors are to be defined as Muslims. While men dominated the debate on covering in the public sphere generally, where Muslim actors are concerned there is a dominance of female voices. Two sorts of actors can be differentiated. In contrast to the UK, the first and dominant type of actors in Austria are collective, who speak as representatives, respectively organized actors. The second type, are as in the UK “symbolic” individuals who are selected by the media to represent the covering issue – often because they are veiled themselves. The latter however are rather marginal compared to the first, and rather are positioned as subjects than as active agents.

For Austria it has to be mentioned that in general women sections within the Islamic Associations are growing (cf. Kroissenbrunner 2003). The initial association, which later became the women’s branch – the Muslim women forum- of the Islamic religious community in Austria (IRCA), which is the officially recognized body of all Muslims in Austria, was informally founded in the wake of a headscarf conflict, on the initiative of the local “Integrationsfonds”, encouraging Muslim women to engage. The “Integrationsfonds” was by then a Viennese association dealing with diversity, which has until today become the official department of the Vienna federal government on integration matters:

The Association was initiated upon a case of discrimination of a headscarf women at the labour market, which turned herself for advice to the Vienna Integration Fond (Wiener Integrationsfonds). Based on that incident Muslim women started to come together and in the wake the initiative of Islamic Austrians for mutual tolerance was created, in order to combat stereotypes against Muslims, and to develop counter strategies. Women (Andrea Saleh and Amina Baghajati) active in the initiative were then incorporated into the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, and in a further step 2004 the Forum of Muslim Women was created.

(Interview with Andrea Saleh, 8.8.2008) The association aims to foster integration of

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14 The media analysis was conducted for the years 2006, 2004, 2003, and 2000 within the VEIL project.
Muslim women and to increase visibility, and to promote participation of Muslim women.\(^{15}\)

The Forum has a scope of around 30 active members. Meetings are held once a month, in order to hold seminars, lectures and workshops, sometimes also excursions etc. are arranged. The majority of the women active within the forum has Austrian citizenship, while their backgrounds are mixed, and according to Saleh they belong to a better situated social strata. So far cooperation with other women movements from majority society exists only at the fringes. There is exchange with the catholic women movement “Anima” Moreover exchange takes place with women who are active within the various mosque associations. (Interview with Andrea Saleh, 8/8/2008)

Interestingly there are hardly any alliances among feminist organizations and Muslim women organizations in Austria. With one exception, when the Forum of Muslim Women invited the Vienna based feminist association “Frauenhetz”, no exchange did take place so far. (ibid.) On the contrary occasionally also (ideological) conflict lines dividing feminist associations and Muslim women organizations become publicly visible.\(^{16}\)

The head of the Forum\(^{17}\) is the women representative Andrea Saleh. In statements on the headscarf question by the Islamic Religious Community Andrea Saleh together with the now

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\(^{15}\) Further goals are: to foster co-operation among Muslim women and with non-Muslim women organizations; to document discriminations against Muslim women; to show up discriminatory structures and mechanisms for Muslim women, and to enhance counter-strategies; to promote women in the sense of empowerment; to work against stereotypes of women in Islam; to create a sensitivity for demands of Muslim women; to claim for Muslim women rights and a gender-equal interpretation of Islamic law; to develop strategies against women hostile traditions; to offer educational training for social groups, which deal with Muslim women, such as hospitals; to make efforts together with Muslim men for a harmony among the sexes; to provide advice for Muslim women who experienced violence; or suffer other individual or societal problems; to offer an intercultural platform for leisure activities for women and girls; to foster inter-religious and inter-feminist dialogue; and finally to support the Islamic Religious Community in Austria.

\(^{16}\) E.g. in a discussion on “arranged marriages”, moderated by the author those ideological conflict lines and lack of cooperation became feasible.

\(^{17}\) Additionally to the Forum the women section of the Young Muslims in Austria, is to mention, which is an active women’s group. Their current head is Amani Abuzahra. According to their self-definition they follow the goal of gender equality and they aim to qualify Muslim women for a self-determined life. They define themselves as Islamic feminists and stand for a European-Islamic Identity. Two times a year they host a federal meeting for young female Muslims. From 2005-2008 they also conducted a project supported by the Labour market office in order to qualify young female Muslims. (http://www.jmoe.at/)

Moreover Muslim religious associations host women sections, who are active in educational, religious concerns. The Islamic Union, the Islamic Centre, the League of Culture, and especially Milli Görüş Austria have big women sections. However according to Andrea Saleh, the women speaker of the Islamic Religious Community in Austria, the women organised within
press speaker of the IGGIÖ Amina Baghajati actively and repeatedly took a position against a prohibition of the headscarf.

The majority of actors of Muslim background that took voice on the issue, stem from the Islamic Religious Community in Austria (IRCA). Other collective actors that have produced public declarations on the issue belong to the Initiative of Austrian Muslims. Actors of the Initiative are however mostly identical with persons holding also official functions, within the IRCA. With the exception of the Muslim Youth of Austria, which are composed by a majority of second generation Muslims, and produced two documents on the headscarf issue, no other Muslim association publicly raised their voice in the matter of headscarf conflicts. Two (male) representatives from Muslim organisations interviewed by the author both refer in the interviews that they hardly raise publicly their voice, as they consider it as the job of the IRCA, as legally recognized representative body of the Muslims, to intervene on issues such as the headscarf.

Additionally to a lack of organized collective (female) Muslim actors other than the IRCA, instead of public claim making rather direct exchange and dialogue with political decision makers by the IRCA are at stake.18

Those associations rarely or don’t take action in a more broader, political sense. They are moreover organized along ethnic lines. (Interview with Andrea Saleh, 8/8/2008)

Both factors correspond with immigrant associations in general. Most of the associations centre around cultural, leisure or sports activities. There are rarely any associations, which are engaged with issues of interest for women. This leads to the fact, according to female migrant report, that projects are often initiated from exterior, such as “Gender-sensitive work in the socio-cultural city-part-project 15- south”, to promote especially women with Muslim background, who have many family duties in their respective households.

In general the female migrant report states, that there is a lack of gender-specific institutionalization in respective ethnic communities. (Bundeskanzleramt- Bundesministerium für Frauen, Medien und Öffentlicher Dienst 2007, 50)

However there a range of women information centres, for female immigrants, which partly developed out of the Women’s movement of the 1980-ies. In those centres lots of women with immigrant background are engaged, and take voice in public. Moreover there are organizations which have developed out of anti-racism movement, and who also involve women with immigrant background, such as MAIZ, a autonomous integration centre from and for women. (ibid, 50)

Finally there are some individual immigrant women, who are active in the Women’s movement and who in particular took voice in the headscarf debate, such as Leila Kececi Arzu, a journalist at the immigrants Journal “Bunte Zeitung”, or voices from the mentioned immigrant women working in information centres for immigrant women, such as Peregrina.

18 Another vivid network, pursued by Muslim actors also exists with representatives of other faith communities. Lots of associations have regular exchange and co-operate with catholic institutions. The female media referee of the Islamic Community is writing once a month in the catholic newspaper ‘Die Furchte’.
The headscarf issue illustrates that Muslims in Austria are due to legal existence of the IRCA, empowered to use institutionalized exchange with authorities and political decision makers as a major means of action. The Islamic religious community (IRCA) has been a leading actor in negotiating and strengthening the right to wear the headscarf in public institutions. In 2004 when the decree was launched for the area of schools, which clarified that the headscarf is part of religious freedom, it was the IRCA which demanded it.

The IRCA likewise intervened effectively when for the first time a representative of the Austrian government was turning against the right to wear the headscarf. Due to this intervention the minister took back her statements.

This informal channel of exchange with political elites was also used concerning a female feminist Austrian journalist, who wrote against the Muslim headscarf. Representatives of the IRCA turned with a complaint to the second president of the National Council, who in turn addressed the journalist and asked for a dialogue between the IRCA and her (Fischer o.J.).

In sum at present visible Muslim actors, and in particular female actors are rather limited to representatives of the IRCA, and those belong to a certain social and educational strata. Those who are most active in taking a stand in the headscarf debate in Austria are likely to have Austrian citizenship. A growing political participation by the young generation is also seen as tied to a growing sense of national belonging. One respondent, representing the women’s youth branch of a big Islamic association said: „They are born here and are grown up here. And they don’t intend to move to Turkey. For instance the old generation they always had the thought, I drive back to Turkey, and now this thought is not there anymore. The youth is already thinking that, and also the grown ups see that this does not work. They are grown up here, and know everything here, they would be lost in Turkey, when they go back or they feel well here. And with time they think what can I do here. I want to participate. And go into politics. Now it is not so strong yet, but I am sure it will increase in the future“. De facto however, those who currently take a leading and visible role in the Austrian public nowadays, are rather first generation (and predominantly male) Muslim immigrants.

Finally as in the UK, the statements produced of Muslims in the headscarf debate, are rather reactive and are reacting on conflicts and statements opposing the right to veil.

The headscarf controversy in Austria shows that dialogue instead of public claim making and protest is chosen by Muslim actors in general, as a main strategy to pursue interests. This is
also indicated by the fact, that despite discrimination such as on the labour market, (with one particular exception) no headscarf cases have brought to court so far. One indicator of a slow transformation of consensus is the fact that more and more women are aware of their rights, and use the tool of anti-discrimination. Currently official complaints due to discrimination at the labour market are increasing and several proceedings are ongoing (Die Presse, September 23, 2008).

When looking at discursive strategies by female Muslim actors in Austria, it can be noticed that veiling is frequently framed as a predominantly religious practice and a religious issue. Associated with that, a rights framing is the predominant framing used by Muslim women, but also male Muslim representatives in headscarf controversies. Prohibitions are argued to act against the basic right of religious freedom. Furthermore, by a continuous stressing of the recognition of Islam in Austria, a strong reference to collective rights was used to defend and praise the status quo, which enables covering in public.

*Comparative summary of Muslim women political mobilization on the issue of veiling*

*Concerning the actors in the public debate it can be summed up:*
1. that in both countries a majority of Muslim actors are female, though this is more clearly evident in the UK, where there is greater visibility of both organised and individual actors (and where some of the actors are Muslim women national politicians)
2. that there is a dominance of individual over collective actors in the UK, while in Austria it is mostly official representatives of the Islamic religious community who are visible.
3. that there is only one organised association dealing explicitly with the issue of covering in the UK, and none in Austria, and that this organisation is female volunteer-led and hampered by lack of support and resources
4. that the female Muslim actors tend to be of high socio-economic and educational status, and to hold citizenship status
5. that there are so far little or no alliances between feminist organisations and Muslim women organizations.

*Concerning strategies of Muslim women a comparison between the countries shows:*
1. that Muslims in Austria and UK use different strategies to defend the right of covering. Muslims in the UK mostly use media intervention as a tool to raise their voice, but also make
some legal challenges, and some political protests and lobbying (at national and EU level). Muslims in Austria rely more heavily on exchange and alliances with political decision makers.

2. that in both countries framing strategies mirroring and appeal to the dominant frames in wider public discourse on covering. As a result, their framing strategies differ notably. In the UK individual rights of choice and free religious expression are stressed most, whereas in Austria debates are framed in terms of religion, participation, and collective rights. In both countries Muslim voices try to challenge the image of oppressed Muslim women. In the UK there are also some strong moral critiques – including of the way that mainstream society treats women in general and Muslims in particular.

**Explaining Participation patterns by Political Opportunities**

How can we explain those different patterns in participation and framing of Muslim women in veiling debates in the two countries?

*Explaining variable: Institutional structure*

Institutional structures influence the openness of a state towards specific (collective) actors respectively shape the chances which voices get heard.

In describing paths of accommodation of Muslim communities in Europe, authors such as Fetzer/Sopper (2005) have specifically underlined the meaning of *state-church relations*. In order to capture institutional varieties of secularism in European nation states, König (2005, 223) enhances the classical typologies of separation, cooperation, and state church by differentiating between four types of polities: statist-republican, liberal, state-corporatist, and social corporatist.

In liberal polities, no corporative units but only individuals are recognized as legitimate actors in the public sphere. Liberal polities are moreover characterized by recognition of a pluralism of individual religious orientation in the public sphere, while privileging an associational and voluntary mode of religious organization. Due to weak “stateness”, religious conflicts are rather low (ibid, 224). The United Kingdom has strongly incorporated this liberal model. In the UK Muslims do not have a single, recognised representative body at national level. There

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19 In regard to the issue of veiling, the Veil project has proved the meaning of state-church models on headscarf policies and framing strategies by actors in national headscarf debates (Gresch/Hadj-Abdou/Rosenberger/Sauer 2009).
have been several attempts to establish one, but none have achieved full legitimacy. The most successful to date is the Muslim Council of Britain. There are also national organisations representing federations of mosques, political and religious campaigning organisations, and a Muslim Parliament. However there is no single, authorised body, which speaks on behalf of all Muslims, nor which has an official relationship with the state.

In contrast Austria is characterized by a corporatist model. Religion in corporatist models is regarded as a part of public sphere, and religious organizations are even invested with public or state functions. It is in their capacity as members of a corporative religious organization that individuals are perceived as religious actors. Religious communities in Austria hence have the status of corporations of public law. Consequently Austria has a mode of religious governance which involves the official incorporation of Muslim communities via a single body, the IRCA (Abid 2006, Permoser-Mourao/Rosenberger 2008). The Islamic Religious Community (IRCA) is legally-constituted, publicly-recognised, provided with autonomy in internal matters of faith. It is, for example, entitled to implement publicly-financed Islamic religious instruction in public schools. Recognized Religious Communities are included in the political process in a corporatist manner (Schakfeh 2005, 157). This system of religious incorporation was established in a time when immigration was not a contested issue. With the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 followed by the annexation in 1908, a large group of Muslims became members of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As the right of public exercise of religion then demanded the status of official recognition, Islam was recognized by the Habsburg administration by a special law in 1912 (Kalb et al 2003). Based on this historically-rooted legal situation, the IRCA was approved by the Austrian state authorities as legal corporate body in 1979 (Kroissenbrunner 2003, 192).

Those different models of policy thus explain why in the UK Muslim women political engagement in headscarf debates are more strongly characterized by individual female Muslim voiced and by voluntary associations. The lack of an officially recognized body also partly explains why the variety of female Muslim protest is stronger in the UK than in Austria.

In Austria in contrast, corporatism, and the existence of a legal Muslim representation is enabling dialogue and effective interest representation, but at the same time this public recognition restrains the quantity and diversity of Muslim women political engagement. This
partly confirms the observation of Nancy Fraser, who underlined that recognition, may diminish chances of minorities within minorities to speak and to get heard.

Moreover the citizenship model seems to impact active participation of Muslim women in veiling debates. The comparison of the UK and Austria shows that in the UK, where more Muslim immigrants are incorporated due to liberal naturalisation procedures and multicultural policy orientation, Muslim women are more visible than in Austria. In Austria a very restrictive, exclusionary nationality act prevails, where a right of nationality is only entitled after 30 years of stay in the country (Çinar/Waltrauch 2007). This is in particular disadvantaging women, as Austrian immigration laws produce dependencies of female immigrants from male breadwinners and the state, this may partly explain a relative lack of protest compared with the UK, despite existing discrimination of Muslim women e.g. at the labour market.

In general both cases, the UK and Austria give further evidence that the degree of exercising “active citizenship” (Lister et al 2005, or civil citizenship as Cesari calls it) is related to citizenship status and already existing rights.

Finally different anti-discrimination machineries in the two countries also influence political participation and framing. Thus, in Britain a freedom and liberty discursive strategies prevails and Muslim women are also more likely to go before court in order to claim for their rights. In Austria in turn, arguments are based more on religious corporative citizenship right than on an individual rights discourse. The meaning of this machinery is also reflected in the absence of court claims by Muslim women in Austria in contrast to the UK.

Explaining variable: Informal procedures and prevailing state strategies

Linked to (historically embedded) institutional structures, are prevailing state strategies and informal procedures. The public role of religion in both countries, and the valuation of religious expression, shape and minimize conflict and thus also protest of Muslim actors including Muslim women.

Moreover an ethno-cultural understanding of nationality in Austria and rather multicultural approach in the UK may have played a role, in which voices are viewed as legitimate and may have (dis-)encouraged Muslim women to speak and to take action.
The majority of Muslim actors in the UK speak as British citizens, this holds true for men and women. They assume that they have a right to be associated with Britain in the fullest sense, and that their voices and demands should be taken seriously in public debate and political decision-making.

In Austria, Muslim actors do not speak as explicitly as Austrian citizens, but they use a reference to Austrian identity patterns, as well as a co-existence of being Austrian and Muslim as a strategy in defence of veiling.

For Austria, most notably however a consensual political culture, - which also leads to a relative lack respectively has led to a belated emergence of protest movements in general- is characterizing political participation of Muslim women, and the lack of conflict. However as the general system of „consociational politics” erodes (Melchior 2005) this may change in the future.

Explaining variable: Actors alliances and configurations

Debates on veiling in particular in Austria, show that collective religious actors, namely the Islamic Religious Community in Austria monopolizes debate on Muslim immigrants. Voices of women with Muslim background, coming from other societal areas than the religious one are hardly present. This leads to a growing identification respectively a conflation of representation in questions of religious belonging and representation of migrants. By this, matters of mal-distribution, as reflected on the labour market situation for women with Muslim background, can be widely ignored in public discourse, and is also less prominent in framing strategies of Muslim women themselves in headscarf controversies. Moreover strong alliances of the Austrian Social Democrats with the Islamic religious Community, but also the strong and successful politicization of the headscarf matter by the far right, narrows down possible alliances of women of Muslim background being critical of veiling, with the political left. As the latter can not gain any electorate anymore by supporting

20 Austria is categorized by Lijphart (1977) and others as a consociational democracy. The second republic however is characterized as ‘a slow erosion of the system of consociational politics’ 20. (Melchior 2005). Consociationalism according to Arend Lijphart and others defines the practice of democratic governance in pluralist societies. The concepts is based on the idea that a cooperative and consensual behaviour of political elites counterbalances a divided society that is segmented along ethnic, religious or ideological lines, and by this stabilizes democracy. (Melchior 2005)
also critical stances on veiling, most of the protest in headscarf debates by actors of Muslim background but also beyond (e.g. just very little liberal feminist debate), is reactive and reaffirming the right to veil.

In the UK it can be assumed that the political representation of Muslims in formal political bodies, do impact the strength and support of claims.

**Conclusion**

There are important and significant national differences right across Europe with regard to how veiling is treated, and how Muslim women actively participate in veiling conflicts and public debates. This is true even of the UK and Austria. As this paper has outlined, these national differences reflect wider differences in opportunity structure and resources, and in the socio-political and economic status of Muslim women. The paper draft at hand represents only a first step to gather more knowledge about the impact and the dynamics of political opportunities on participation of Muslim women. Clearly more in-depth study is needed to analyse the gendered dimension of political opportunity structures. This might be provided by a systematic comparison of male and female political participation of Muslims in selected countries. But also multi-level comparisons within one nation state might give further analytical insights on the gendered nature of political opportunities. It can be assumed that local levels are more likely to be open for women to actively participate. Thus also other, broader forms of political participation and articulation on veiling conflicts, e.g. within mosque associations have to be considered and studied more intensively, to give a more comprehensive picture on political mobilization of Muslim women in that matter. Finally a trans-national approach would open up a perspective which is able to grasp dynamics of trans-national political mobilization and effects of Europeanization processes. The paper at hand is intended to provide an incentive and a basis for further studies in that direction, and aims to contribute to start a reflection the often gender blind but highly relevant research fields of immigration and political mobilization.
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